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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PREF](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [IR](#) [LE](#) [IZ](#) [TU](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: CONGRESSMAN HASTINGS' JANUARY 7 MEETING WITH
PRESIDENT ASAD

REF: DAMASCUS 00008

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Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (S) Summary: Congressman Alcee Hastings met President Bashar al-Asad on January 7 for a cordial one-hour discussion on how the U.S. and Syria might improve regional stability. During the meeting, the congressman told the president he would advocate for Syria to be granted observer status with the Mediterranean Partnership of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE-PA). In addition, he expressed interest in having a Syrian national serve as one of his interns at some point in the future, an offer the president clearly viewed favorably. Asad covered familiar ground substantively on regional stability, peace talks with Israel, Syrian views on Iraq, support for refugees, and Iran's nuclear program. He appeared to show even more openness than he had with CODEL Gregg (reftel) on the subject of reopening the Damascus Community School. End Summary.

Welcomes and Thanks Set Positive Atmospherics

¶2. (S) President Asad welcomed Congressmen Hastings' visit and noted how important it was for U.S. officials to come and gain a fuller understanding of the country, its people and culture, so as to have the appropriate context within which to analyze "the facts." "The media," Asad said, "has not conveyed an accurate message. Don't read the facts, see them," he emphasized. Congressman Hastings, for his part, agreed these visits were positive and essential to forming a balanced assessment of the issues. He thanked Asad for cooperating with the U.S. Embassy, which he said was working hard to improve bilateral relations, and praised Syria's ambassador to the U.S., Imad Mustafa, "for doing an

extraordinary job" He also expressed his condolences over the death of the president's brother Majd.

International Fora and Exchanges

13. (S) The congressman initiated the conversation by noting his strong commitment to multilateral fora and his past presidency of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE-PA). In his current role as an appointed Special Representative of the OSCE-PA, the congressman stated he would advocate for Syria to be granted observer status to the OSCE-PA Mediterranean Partnership. Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Israel, and Jordan all had observer status, the congressman pointed out, adding that he offered the same advocacy to Libya and would do the same with President Sleiman when he met with him in Beirut following his trip to Damascus. Congressman Hastings told Asad he also felt granting observer status to the Palestinians would be beneficial to all, and while this was not the prevailing sentiment in the OSCE-PA, there were other strong supporters.

14. (S) Picking up on the president's argument on the value of "visits," Congressman Hastings invited Asad to send a young adult intern to his office, observing that in the past he had hosted interns from around the world, including Finland, Germany, France, Slovenia, Kazakhstan, many of whom had gone on to leadership roles in their respective countries. The president thought the idea an excellent one and speculated he might even like to send someone from his own office to intern with the congressman.

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Regional Stability

15. (S) Responding to Congressman Hastings' question on how Syria viewed enhancing regional stability as well as the U.S. surge in Afghanistan, Asad cautioned that while the U.S. is indisputably an international player, the nation's officials often fail to see how myriad problems are linked and instead mistake "a part for the whole." "In Iraq, for example," the president stated, U.S.-Syrian engagement had primarily centered on border security discussions, "but this problem is a result of other problems." In discussing Iraq, Lebanon, Palestinians, the peace process, "and even Pakistan, you have to see the linkages."

16. (S) Asad told the congressman that during his December 30 meeting with a bipartisan CODEL Gregg (reftel), he had argued President Obama represented a "new opportunity" for regional peace. Knowing full well some CODEL Gregg members were Republicans, Asad recounted how he admonished the CODEL to seize the opportunity, for no one else could move the process forward. Of course the problem for any American president, he continued, was the four-year term, the first year of which was spent learning the job and the fourth year on campaigning. Such time constraints left only two years for managing the complicated array of regional problems. Constraining Obama even further, Asad lamented, was the unmanageable "fireball" left behind by the previous administration.

17. (S) Terrorism, Asad remarked, remained the most significant regional challenge for the international community. "Terrorism is a result of extremism, which in turn is a result of desperation," Asad said. "We can't solve it all at once, but if we begin to work on any one element of the problem, we can positively affect the other elements and move forward." Congressman Hastings later queried the president on possible cooperation with other countries, especially Russia, on regional stability. Asad replied that

while Syria had "good relations" with Russia and that his government welcomed "anyone interested in peace," he could not speculate on what role Russia might play regionally until Russia first "defined a role for itself." Asad pointed to Turkey as a prime example of a country that in defining its mission was able to bring about positive change -- namely, the four rounds of indirect Syrian-Israeli peace talks. When the congressman expressed interest in any growing role China might have regionally, Asad said he had met the Chinese and Japanese Middle East envoys, "but they don't do anything." He added that his government was "looking for initiatives."

Afghanistan

¶8. (S) Noting the U.S. was actively going forward in Afghanistan, Congressman Hastings asked Asad for his views on Afghanistan's future prospects. Asad replied he had predicted from the outset that the U.S. would not solve the problem of terrorism by invading Afghanistan. The U.S. would succeed in the beginning, he claimed to have forewarned, but later it would bog down. Asad offered the analogy of cancer to illustrate his point: "if you just cut it, it will spread faster; you have to extract the whole thing at once." He did not elaborate, however, on what an "extraction" of this sort would entail.

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Peace Process

¶9. (S) "We need a partner," Asad implored, "but if Israel is not serious, there can be no progress." Not having a partner, Asad continued, did not mean there was nothing to be done. Taking a long view of the process, Asad contended it was less a matter of "who" was in government, than how the process unfolded. Peace negotiations required building lasting relationships and should avoid focusing on discrete victories. During the negotiations of the 1980s and 1990s, which led to the Madrid Peace Conference and the Oslo Accord, nothing was ever "institutionalized," the result being that the two events never produced lasting results. Even the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, Asad asserted, failed in that the two countries were against one another, as everyone in the region knew.

¶10. (S) The president maintained indirect talks were still an indispensable first step to avoid the failure of the 1990s. Indirect talks allowed for working-level contacts to build a solid, institutional framework in advance of direct negotiations between principals. Turkey had been ideal because (1) it was geographically close, and (2) the U.S. had not been interested in playing a role. "We know what the deal is--land for security," Asad said. "I'll define the land and they (Israel) will define security. I have six points on the border to discuss; they have six points on security. Establishing these criteria was the purpose of Turkey." Syria was ready to return to Turkish mediation if Israel were a willing partner. Asad cautioned, however, that moving from indirect to direct talks would require the U.S. and its international security guarantees. First, though, the U.S. had to convince Israel to resume indirect talks in Turkey.

Iraq--The Failed Debate

¶11. (S) The debate on stability in Iraq had been misguided in the past on two key points, Asad posited. First, the U.S.'s approach to the insurgency had been couched in the language of "civil war." He admitted some of Iraq's violence was driven by sectarian concerns; however, he argued the overall secular fabric of Iraqi society would hold for the near

future. In the longer term, though, it could disintegrate, he warned. Were this to happen, Asad intoned, "a domino effect" of civil wars would spread across the region, causing decades of unrest. A second distortion in U.S. debate on Iraq was the false binary of "leave or not leave," which masked the more pressing question of "how to leave." Trying to determine which choice would produce more chaos was a false one; the real debate should have been about how to implement a political process that would militate against chaos-producing conditions. Asad commended Obama's decision to withdraw from Iraq, implying that this policy shift gave him the political cover to support U.S. initiatives in a way he could not do previously. "Now I can help," he said.

Iraq--A Reconciliation Conference?

¶12. (S) A reconciliation between Iraqi factions was necessary, Asad continued, and initially the Syrians had thought Prime Minister Maliki could bring one about. Unfortunately, "Maliki fought with everyone," undermining any possibility for internal accord, Asad said. The next step, he believed, was for Iraq to host an international conference that would include not only relevant international

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interlocutors, but representatives of all internal parties, including the Ba'athists. Such a conference, he declared, would be the basis for a new constitution, the first step toward creating stability in the country.

¶13. (S) Asad implied Syria had unique and relevant experience on reconciliation issues because of its long involvement in Lebanon, whose history of political violence was much longer and more complicated than Iraq's. Presumably referring to the 1989 Taif Agreement, Asad recounted how during the years of Lebanese civil war, there were "300 cease-fires," but only when an international conference accompanied the cease-fire did the peace finally hold. A conference in Iraq was, he confessed, a "temporary solution," but one that could serve as "springboard" for the next, longer-term solution.

Iraq--Border Security

¶14. (S) Returning to the subject of security along Syria's border with Iraq, Asad complained about recriminations leveled against Syria for putatively facilitating foreign fighters. "If I did this, I would be shooting myself in the foot," he exclaimed, adding that bringing terrorists into the country made no sense if for no other reason that one would run the risk of losing control of them. Asad pointed out that terrorists did not need to be "smuggled" from one country into another. "They have passports." Syria had always been willing to cooperate with the U.S. on Syria, Asad argued, pointing to the 2001 letter he wrote President Bush pledging assistance on intelligence and security. U.S. intelligence interlocutors had a lot of information, but lacked the contextual knowledge for analyzing that information, Asad asserted. "We had the most experience in this."

¶15. (S) Reprising a theme he had sounded a week earlier with CODEL Gregg, Asad argued the contrast in security along Syrian-Turkish and Syrian-Iraqi borders was an object lesson. The Syria-Turkey border was longer and the presence of the PKK on both sides had made it more dangerous than Syria's border with Iraq. Nevertheless, Syria had succeeded in controlling its side of the border for two fundamental reasons: in Turkey, Syria was dealing with an actual state and a cooperative partner, unlike with Iraq. Congressman Hastings acknowledged control of a long border was difficult even under the best of circumstances, citing U.S. endeavors to manage its border with Mexico.

¶16. (S) Border security, according to Asad, remained a less significant issue for Syria than it did for the U.S. In the interest of building a relationship, though, Asad said his government was willing to engage on it. Special Envoy George Mitchell visited, as did U.S. military delegations, and the border issue was a topic of conversation, he observed, "but then nothing happened." A/S Feltman told Vice Foreign Minister Faisal Migdad that the U.S. could not start coordinating on the technical assessment because of pressure from PM Maliki. "We don't understand this -- you control Iraq," Asad ejaculated.

Iraq--Refugees

¶17. (S) In the latter portion of the meeting, Congressman Hastings steered the president toward the topic of Iraqi refugees in Syria. The congressman acknowledged the burden Syria bore in terms of supporting refugees, and noted that

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Jordan, too, had taken a step forward by accepting up to 40,000. He added that the time had come for the Iraqi government to do something about the refugees' plight. Echoing Asad's earlier connection of "desperation" and "terrorism," the congressman argued the refugees' displacement and poverty created the conditions for terrorism. Given this, the congressman said, "how can we best help you?" Asad agreed with the congressman's assessment, adding these refugees could produce a destabilizing influence in Iraq down the road, but the time had come for Iraq, with a surplus of tens of billions of dollars, to take some of the responsibility. Asad claimed Iraq paid nothing toward refugee assistance, while the Syrian government extended the same services and subsidies to them as it did to its own people. Ultimately, though, Asad said the key was education and Iraq should be building schools for the refugees. "It's a political and a humanitarian problem," he continued. Iraq's political leadership, PM Maliki in particular, lacked vision, he said. "The U.S. needs to see this."

Iran

¶18. (S) Unprompted by the congressman, Asad outlined the same Syrian position on Iranian nuclear enrichment as he had with other CODELS. Iran, as signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty, had a right to pursue nuclear enrichment under IAEA monitoring and Asad felt compelled to support Iran on this point. The next step was to decide how much, by what processes, and where Iran's uranium should be enriched. Iran, Asad argued, was willing to enrich up to 20 percent for medical purposes, which fell well below the 95 percent enrichment threshold required for weapons-grade material. The West, Asad complained, demanded all uranium be sent outside the country for enrichment. "I told the Europeans that if they don't change this, I cannot support it. I wouldn't do that," the president said. Such a deal offered no assurances to the Iranians they would ever get their uranium back. Asad speculated Iran might be willing to ship uranium for enrichment abroad in a gradual manner, and had suggested to French President Sarkozy that perhaps Iran could send a quarter or a third of its stockpiles abroad at a time. Sarkozy, Asad claimed, had entertained the idea until the U.S. quashed it. "Are we looking for a solution or a problem? Attacking Iran is no solution," Asad concluded.

DCS

¶19. (S) Seizing on the theme of education, Congressman

Hastings remarked that the closure of the Damascus Community School (DCS) was a problem not only for Embassy operations, which certainly suffered in terms of recruiting new officers, but for the Damascus community as a whole. He expressed his hope the school might resume operations. Asad replied he had not wanted to close the DCS, but after the U.S. attack on Abu Kamal in October 2008, "We had to do something." Asad had promised President Carter in late 2008 he would reopen it, and still planned to do so. Reopening the DCS, he asserted, should be done through a process. "Let's make it part of improving the bilateral relationship." (Comment: Throughout this portion of the discussion, FM Muallim was shaking his head slowly and glaring at the Charge d'Affaires. End comment.) Asad noted that as promised to S/E George Mitchell, he re-opened the American Language Center. "Mitchell left and then nothing happened," Asad remarked, intimating a lack of reciprocal goodwill gestures on the part

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of the U.S. Asad continued, "There are no big obstacles to opening the school. You'll be able to do it at any time." The CDA noted reopening the school would take advance planning. Asad replied, "You have the building and the people, so it's not a big problem." CDA reminded the president that all school employees had left the country, but added he stood ready to work with the relevant ministries on reopening the DCS at the earliest possible opportunity.

¶20. (C) U.S. participants:

CDA Charles Hunter
Congressman Alcee Hastings
Ms. Lale Malmaux, Chief of Staff for Congressman Hastings
Mr. Anthony Deaton, notetaker

¶21. (C) Syrian participants:

President Bashar al-Asad
Foreign Minister Walid Muallim
Two unnamed staff members

¶22. (SBU) CODEL Hastings did not have an opportunity to clear this cable.

HUNTER